Tip Sheet: Measuring the Effectiveness of Your Project

One of the eligibility requirements for a Ralph N. Kleps Award is that the nominated project must have existed long enough to have results, outcomes, or benefits that demonstrate its impact on the court and the public it serves. In other words, the project must have been evaluated, or measured in some way.

This tip sheet is designed to help you meet this Kleps Award eligibility requirement. However, whether it's for a Ralph N. Kleps Award, grant proposal, or simply to report on a court project, a basic understanding of (and comfort with) project evaluation is invaluable.

Evaluation is the process of determining the effectiveness of a project. Many times an evaluation can also show if a project has unexpected benefits, or creates unexpected problems. Project evaluation doesn't necessarily require lots of money, time, or expertise. In many cases, evaluation can be much easier than you think. It can even be fun. As with most tasks, the key to success is in the preparation.

Many of us tend to avoid measuring our projects. See if some of these reasons sound familiar to you:

- *Our project is too unique to measure.*
- *There's no time to evaluate.*
- *It works and everyone likes it, why evaluate?*
- *Evaluations are too complicated.*
- *It's not my responsibility.*
- *An evaluation would cost too much.*
- *We've never done an evaluation before.*
- *It's the rainy season.*

You may be able to add one or two rationales to the list!

Here is some good news: There are some excellent tools available to you within the Administrative Office of the Courts. There are also AOC staff members available for you to talk to about your particular project. You really want your project to be the very best it can be, right? Evaluation is one way you can do just that.

The following few pages give you a sampling of evaluation strategies and techniques, many of which you can do yourself at little or no cost. The list is not exhaustive, but should give you some direction as you begin to measure the effectiveness of your project.

Evaluation planning from the start.

Ideally, evaluation procedures and activities are woven into your project during the planning stages before it starts. Evaluation planning activities could include:

- Plan for pilot testing your project's activities.
- Plan for determining if the program is working as you designed it and if you are reaching you desired outcomes.
- System for gathering the data, or information you will need.

Evaluation components.

There are several basic steps to most project evaluations. The more sophisticated an evaluation becomes, the more steps that can be added. For purposes of the Kleps Awards, the evaluation design can be simple and somewhat informal. The important thing is to be purposeful and deliberate about whatever form of information collection is selected. Here are some of the basic steps:

1. **A clear objective**. Without a clear statement of the purpose, or objective of an evaluation, you will not know what to measure. For example, your objective could be something like:
   - To learn whether the court users understood our brochure on obtaining a restraining order, or
   - To measure how many training participants completed our program to increase their computer skills, or
   - To measure the satisfaction of Night Court participants to the evening calendar.

2. **A description of the target population.** The target population will vary depending on the project. To evaluate some projects, a control, or comparison group will also need to be identified. For example:
   - All fifth graders who participate in our law-related education project and a group of fifth graders from the same school who did not participate, or
   - Court users who view your guardianship video, and a group of court users who seek guardianship and did not view the video.

3. **A description of what is to be evaluated.** Write down the type of information you wish to collect and how the information relates to the objectives of the project. For example:
   - The project's objective is to increase fine and fee collection. We will track the fine and fee collections each month for the 12 months before implementation of the new program and 12 months after the implementation of the new program.
   - The project's objective is to increase knowledge of 8th grader students about the criminal justice system. We'll conduct pre- and post tests before

and after the moot court and compare the knowledge levels of the students.

4.   **The methods of collecting information**. On the following pages are listed some methods of collecting data.

5.   **Design and test instruments that will be used to collect information**. This could be as simple as a three-question survey of court users who use the self-help center. It could be a satisfaction survey.

6.   **Collect and analyze the information**. You will look at and draw conclusions based on all the information you have gathered. If you are analyzing the information yourself, you will need to be scrupulous about considering all the information, even if it surfaces problems with the project, or shows the project is not as effective as you were hoping.

7.   **Evaluation report.** Write a report giving the results of the evaluation. Then, pat yourself on the back. You have completed an evaluation.

Methods of collecting information.

Qualitative information. Here are two methods of collecting qualitative information. Qualitative information is open-ended and especially helpful when you are evaluating the impressions, beliefs and feelings of the persons participating in the evaluation.

- **Personal interviews**. The purpose of an individual, open-ended interview is to obtain in-depth information, perhaps on sensitive issues that the interviewee would be reluctant to discuss in a group. There are some pit-falls with interviews including bias of the interviewer, and it can be time-consuming and therefore expensive. For most projects, several interviews will need to be conducted in order to gain a full range of responses.
- **Focus groups**. Focus groups are similar to personal interviews, except the questions are asked of groups of four to eight persons. Focus groups have an advantage over individual interviews because the comments of one person can stimulate the thoughts of another. The groups, in most cases, should be made up of persons who are similar, for example, all judges, or all supervisors, or all training participants.

The number of persons to interview or involve in focus groups depends on the size and diversity of your target population. In most cases, the more persons you interview, the better. If your analysis is based on the views of thirty persons, it will be far more valuable than only three or four views. You will want to develop your interview or focus group questions with care, so you gather the information that will be helpful to your evaluation objective.

Here are some examples of open-ended questions:

> What led you to the self-help center?
> What have you learned so far about the criminal justice system in our county?
> Tell me about your experience using the court's website?
> What did you learn from you experience in the Drug Court?
> What barriers did you encounter in distributing the brochures?

Quantitative information. Quantitative information is data that can be expressed in numbers. For example, the number of persons who participated in a training program, the percentage of change in retrieval of records after the implementation of a new records management system. Results from qualitative information can be used to draw conclusions about the project. For example, suppose everyone in a focus group already has successfully participated in a Drug Court. You could not conclude that all Drug Court participants completed the program. However, if you conducted a survey and found that 60% of all Drug Court participants graduated, then you could estimate the number of drug court participants that graduate from your program.

Here are two ways to gather quantitative information.

Counting systems. A counting system is the easiest method to quantify your project's results. It merely involves keeping written records of all events pertinent to the project. For example, each brochure distributed, number of persons who watched the video, number of persons who completed a form correctly. It can be especially useful to keep track of the same items before and after your project was implemented. For example:

♦ The number of jail days of similarly charged defendants who did, and did not participate in the intervention.
♦ The number of court employees who were promoted who did, and did not graduate from the leadership program.
♦ The percentage of defendants who did not appear for the calendar when it was held during working hours, compared with the evening calendar.

Surveys. A survey is a method of collecting information that can be expressed numerically. Surveys can gather information on the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of the target population. They can measure the target population's satisfaction, knowledge before and after the project, the effect of your project.

A survey instrument is the tool used to gather the survey information. The most common is the questionnaire. Other tools include checklists or interview schedules. Before designing a survey instrument, you will want to decide on the method you will use to administer it. For example, instruments designed to be completed by the

respondent without an interviewer will most likely be shorter and easier to follow than those to be administered by an interviewer.

When designing a survey, keep in mind that it must appeal as much as possible to the people you hope will respond. Here are some tips:

- Use language at the reading level of the least educated people in your target population.
- Avoid abbreviations, acronyms and terms that may not be easily understood by the target population
- Keep the number of items to a minimum needed to fulfill the requirements of the survey. In other words, the information you are trying to gather. The more items, the less likely people are to respond.
- Make the survey attractive. Make the survey visually appealing, using lots of empty space, lively fonts and layout.

For the purposes of the Kleps Awards, evaluation information and reports can be simple and informal, as long as they actually show effectiveness.

It is hoped that this tip-sheet has helped. Let us know how we can make it better, or provide other information that would be helpful to you. In that way, you are helping us to evaluate this tip-sheet!

For more information and practical tools for evaluating your projects see, The Evaluation Toolkit, produced by the Legal Services Trust Fund. It's free and available on-line at: www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/equalaccess/research.htm. There are many other excellent resources available at the same link.

For more ideas, call or email Beth Shirk, 415-865-7870, or beth.shirk@jud.ca.gov.

Good luck!